

What do Stones Smell Like?

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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Abstract

What do Stones Smell Like is a text-based artwork developed through a multidisciplinary studio practice and auto-ethnographic research. It is a romance of reclaiming the ill body from the jaws of stillness by merging with the universe of things. Like an ever-growing creature made of unfired clay, new limbs being hastily built-on as others drop off. The ill mind/body is never fully relieved; at best, it manages to forget its ill state through distraction and fantasy.

Acknowledgments

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Preface

This paper is conceived as a support and complement to the dual channel video I made with my partner and collaborator Yannick Desranleau entitled *What Do Stones Smell like in the Forest?* (2018) However, rather than a analysis of the video, of my antecedents, or of my working methods, this text is intended as a work of art in and of itself. Though the text touches on various aspects of the video's production, it does so in an oblique and fractured manner meant to recall both the psychic state of chronic illness and the experience of watching a looping gallery video. This paper and the video are both part of an as-yet-untitled suite of works that explores the idea of the body as material and the material as willful, through the lens of invisible disability.

In 2011, I became ill. I began experiencing vertigo, blackouts, sensory issues, chronic pain, and debilitating chronic fatigue that made it increasingly difficult to work, or often even get out of bed. I would eventually be diagnosed with two co-morbid chronic illnesses, neither of which is treatable. I was in my thirties and having to re-learn to use my body, in order to mitigate symptoms and to make the most of the small working window I had. I went from being an extremely active person who was known among by peers for the amount of projects I had on the go at a given time, to one whose world and life shrank suddenly and inexplicably. This not only changed my personal life, but also drastically changed my collaborative practice with my partner, leading us to work slower and with larger teams but also into reassessing the body as an object.

An object as contingent and fragile as any of our props; bodies are always in flux, always changing via illness, injury, medical interventions, pregnancy, aging, or drugs. The only way for me to live with invisible disability without succumbing to bitterness was to incorporate it into our joint practice and view this transformation of my own body as a point of research.

Finding my own body increasingly alien due to illness, I began to feel a deeper affinity for our things, for our props and material. Stuck in bed, I'd daydream myself as an inert thing and then bring those speculative reflexions into the studio, and into our dance scores.

The Works

The first work in the previously mentioned suite of works was *Is It The Sun Or the Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black*, which was first presented as a live performance at Art Toronto in 2016, and then produced as a 103-minute dual-channel video in 2017.

A series of ten vignettes that alternated across two video projections, the score for *Is It The Sun Or The Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black* was written loosely and either presented the performer with series of movements, or a specific object to perform with. The performers were unrehearsed, and had to interpret the directions in real-time on stage through an earpiece. The voice-over component is meant to be both an internal monologue for the person performing on-screen, and a sort of omniscient narrator. In a

variety of ways, it reflects on the relationships between bodies and objects. For the first time, some sketches introduce auto-biographical reflections on living with chronic illness.

What do Stones Smell Like in the Forest? Double channel 4K digital video with surround sound, 18 min. 39 sec; installation.

Mezzo-soprano Marie-Annick Béliveau plays the lead character, a woman whose illness has made her body foreign. I use the golem as a metaphor for a body no longer controllable by its owner, a body that is heavy, slow and defined by its materiality. Opposite to the golem is a classical choir, serving as detached narrators. The choir, interpreted by choreographer Mary Williamson and dancers Karen Fennel and Maxine Segalowitz, are more than able-bodied. Their ability hinders them to connect with or understand the golem.

The Lead Apron (2018)

Solo performance for French horn player, approx. 20 minutes; installation.

At the time of writing, this performance work is being workshopped. It will be performed by Sarah Wendt May 3rd and 24th 2018 in the black box theatre in the EV building of Concordia University.

What do Stones Smell Like? (2018)

Text-based artwork.

At least one other video is being planned for this suite.

The Props

The works in this suite, apart from *What do Stones Smell Like*, are all performance works in which the performer, usually a dancer, uses props alternately as costume, body extension or dance partner. The props suggest movements via their surface and heft, extending the body into space and changing the way it moves. They are decidedly low-tech; made of cast rubber, flex foam, vinyl, fabric, papier-mâché, tyvek or printed banner vinyl. Their fragile materiality means that the props wear the scars of past performances and change over time.

All of our props are created to be ambiguously physical. They are abstract but in their form, suggest they could be of the body. They are designed to be ergonomic in the hands of the performer, but also to connect together to create sculptural still lives when not being performed. They are made with an emphasis on the haptic.

The Text

The following text was developed in a writing workshop led by Chris Kraus at the Plug-In ICA in Winnipeg, June 2017. Elements of it were adapted to write the libretto for *What do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* and the script for *The Lead Apron*.

The People

The Golem: Marie-Annick Béliveau, mezzo-soprano

Choir and Dancers: Mary St-Amand Williamson, Karen Fennell, Maxine Segalowitz

Director of Photography: Oswaldo Toledano

Orchestration: Dominique Alexander

Chief Choreographer and Dramaturgy Consultant: Mary St-Amand Williamson

Outside Eye: Kim Sanh Châu

Voice Coach and Choir Direction: Louise Campbell

Sound Engineer: Steve Bates

Light Technician: Paolo Malo

Production Assistant and Still Photography: Edwin Isford

Continuity: Lisa Ceccarelli

Hair Stylist: Jonas Gilbert

Makeup: Drew McComber

Script, Direction, Art Direction, Costumes, Libretto, Vocal Score:

Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau

Foreword

This is a work of auto-ethnography yet not everything in it is true. It is as dull and airless as a sickroom. Characters have been stripped for parts and reused; this is my strategy in the studio so this will also be my strategy here. It's an auto-ethnography of illness and being, of material, of entropy and of gradually becoming invisible.

What does a golem smell like? Wet, earthy, a bit salty, and a touch green.

Somewhat like petrichor with a whiff of musty stillness, tinged with iron.

The golem lumbers stiffly, and slowly. It is the original cyborg, a created body with a task at hand. It does the task poorly.

The cyborg is sleeker, more beautiful, and functional. However, it smells of acetone and off-gassing plastic, a smidge of aroma-chemical freshness. The cyborg is sleek but smells of the one-dollar store; that is its contradiction.

What does a bed smell like when you can't get out of it for days? When the sheets are home to cracker crumbs and splashes of spilled tea? Oolong and Earl Grey, usually. When the patio door is open and a fig-scented candle is burning, dripping off the edge of the dresser? I have been investing in fancy vintage pyjamas made of silk and hand-tatted lace for these situations.

The cat smells like dust and sunshine, it leaves bits of itself anywhere it goes. It is very old.

I am a golem. My movements are stiff and slow. I'm as heavy and damp as unfired clay. It requires enormous effort to lift my arms, to raise my feet, to bend my spine. I sit, I lean, I brace myself in order to keep the damp, salt-and-iron-smelling clay in one piece.

During the studio visit, she watched an hour of the film and inevitably, the conversation turned – “Are you going to seek out those bodies?” That’s how I knew for sure she was what Virginia Woolf called one of the upright. She didn’t know, couldn’t know how much labour is required of the golem to move its stiff and heavy limbs. That when the golem moves, the clay pulls apart. It doesn’t mend easily.

How does one know when a character is required? If I tell you I became her friend because of her work would you understand that I mean the secrets that one leaves behind in the materials?

All of us, and everything, is made of the raw ingredients of the universe and often, close and careful examination shows one how the thing is made. I always want to see how the thing is made.

As a character I’ll say this, she is beautiful and brilliant. Her cheekbones slice the air and her hands are rough and un-manicured because of all the things she makes. She goes to the studio every day, she is very disciplined. She has a subtle gift for style, outside of trends. It seems to contradict the sheer over-the-topness of everything that she makes. She looks nothing like her work.

I couldn’t tell her that she drank too much, even when she asked, because my own habit of doing nothing was worse. I’ve always been inclined towards laziness. I told her to ask her therapist, and that I took Benadryl to sleep when I was out of Ambien, so who

was I to say? I told her I could be a hypocrite and that really, bodies were just material. She is very, very thin.

Her flat smells like expensive things. Like old wood and candles that you could only buy at that one shop in Paris. She smells like gardenias and beeswax and quotes long passages from Austen from memory. She is mean and funny and doesn't know how to ride a bike. Her cat smells like nothing and never leaves traces of itself anywhere.

What do stones smell like in the forest? What do they smell like on the beach, in the sun?

She filled her pockets with stones and ended up on the riverbed, her hair floating around like seaweed. She was 59, was Leonard relieved? My pockets contain hair-ties and receipts; lip balm and store-brand Ibuprofene, coated in lint. I don't know how long these things have been there, but they are in and on everything I own.

I don't swim and I stay out of cold water, away from rushing currents. I never told you about the time I almost drowned, swallowing gulps of the sea, alone on an empty beach, terrified. I was 19. I was embarrassed. I still am.

My new friend calls me a lady, when she says the word I imagine quotation marks around it. I must be passing as something other than what I am. It is unimaginable for me, that someone could see me as something other than a golem. My hands are stiff and arms

won't bend back, at the vintage shop she unzips and zips me up. I buy the dress, 1970s Givenchy. It is too expensive and very chic. I just might pass.

Sometimes, on the edge between insomnia and Ambien, I wonder if maybe I somehow transformed in the x-ray machine, the lead apron leaving its weight, its pressure and its lack of grace on me?

Her cat struggled when I scooped it up. Could it tell that I wasn't what I seemed?

One of the symptoms, in fact the worst one, is what they call brain fog. Fog is woefully inadequate. Instead it's as if every part of the mind is wrapped up in cotton wool, in itchy pink fiberglass, synapses all isolated in their dry, fibrous duvets, kept far apart. Everything inside is muffled and slow. Each neuron is wearing its own lead apron. It's hard to think. It's hard to read. It's hard to remember. It's hard not to zone out, distracted by nothing in particular. Golems don't strike me as thoughtful.

My letter writing falls off. I'm a lousy long-distance friend.

We made loose plans to get Botox together; I think that this is a good activity for new friends. I wondered if asserting some temporary control over the surface would distract me from what is going on below? Lately, I've been dropping things. I'm afraid of losing the use of my right hand.

How does one describe the scent of salt to those convinced that the mineral has none? Do they not smell the brine of the sea, the metallic tang on opening the blue and white box? It's as impossible as describing the colour red to the colourblind, because what can we say about red other than it is red? Salt smells like nothing but salt. It's tangy and fresh and sharp and clean and if these things are contradictory, it's because most scents are. Even the tuberose has a whiff of spoiled meat and rubber tires.

The stones are heavy in my hand. They smell like water and earth. I slip one in my dress pocket to remember. I've already forgotten it there.

I gather objects to create narrative, or that is my excuse. Collections gather shed fur, dust, fingerprints, along with their secret histories, storage of stories.

I transform myself into an object in order to reposition my own history among things. Also, among the things. If you were here, you'd ask me if I didn't already have enough; but since you are not I fall into a period of rest, becoming lazy and undisciplined. My hair is flecked with paint from three weeks ago, my sweatshirt still has traces of papier-mâché used to create the latest batch of props. I bring them to life.

Emet. I am excited to no longer be long-distance.

Excited about this project, there were those clusters of days and weeks recently when I'd stay late in the studios, only to be met with days of immobility. Projects would collect in either space, halfway done, looking like nothing at all. My hands, my legs, my back

would cease to be under my control and I'd find myself staring at my swollen fingers, as if I'd never seen them before. When did I become this thing?

How does one continue to birth a body of work with a body that doesn't labour or function?

Later, at home, I burn white copal in a tiny brass bowl on top of a slice of marble. My balcony would not smell of the city but of a pure bonfire. My cat would doze through the din of the summer weekend, his protruding tooth pressed against the flesh of my leg.

After my reading, she looked me in the eye and emphatically told me she was glad she had stayed. Awkwardly, I walked off the patio and out of the rain. I have always felt out of place. I arrange the objects in order to find a place for myself. I make objects in order to extend and re-make myself.

We met moments before I performed, enthusing over each other's style.

"Are you an artist?"

"No."

"She's on our board though."

"So you are art-adjacent?"

"Yes, art-adjacent. I like that, I will use that."

I knew it was going to rain. I was not surprised when fat drops hit me on the face as I read, pacing the pavement, microphone in hand. The air was heavy with the scent of

ozone and dampness, and something awful like burnt metal. The scent of rain in the city has always struck me as unpleasant. Musty.

I'll try to describe the sensation that radiates from the protruding knot of bone, where my neck and shoulders meet, and its double, deep in my tailbone and flowing outward. These are pain-adjacent. Stiff and blocked, pins and needles, no amount of stretching nor soaking, not heat, nor anti-inflammatories lessen the bone deep yawning itch.

One time I slipped on water on that tiny stage in the tiny club in a town I don't remember. I clipped my tailbone on the edge, hard. The throbbing kept me awake for the rest of the tour.

If only I were a solid, inanimate thing.

After she died, her best friend gave me some of her things. I was uncomfortable, unsure if we had been close enough to deserve them. Nevertheless, I accepted. A pair of earrings that broke in my hand before I could wear them now live in a decorative metal box inside my dresser. The brass cuff, I wear it everyday and think of the most accomplished person I knew when I notice it. The last object is a strange purple glass bottle, in a cage of tin. On the bottom a sticker says Made in Israel. I think of it as a perfume bottle though there is no evidence for this, it smells of nothing and its tarnished spout has no lid. It sits on my bookshelf, in the Js and Ks: James Joyce, Jamaica Kincaid, Chris Kraus. Because I have no clue what its true purpose or its relationship to her was, I often stare at it and wonder.

I wonder if it was a souvenir, brought back from a Birthright trip or a random tchotchke from the thrift store she liked the aesthetic of. I wonder about its place in her home in Brooklyn, her home in Chicago, her home in Montreal that I never visited. I wonder how absurd she would think it was, that she died accidentally, much too young. Would she find it absurd that I find myself thinking of her daily or that this strange object seems to hold all I remember about her?

I wish I could tell her that this context-less thing has become her ghost. That it lives right across from the head of my bed.

We had known each other seemingly forever, but not well, only becoming close online once she started the discussion group. My band crashed with her once in Chicago, where she was in med school, the night I slipped off stage and broke my ankle. I barely remember anything after the doctor snapped my bones back into place.

Is it absurd how much we have in common with these inanimate things, how easily we too break. (A scent of glass.)

The longer I live with this body, the more symptoms intensify. My skin bruises mysteriously in the night. My eyes throb in too much and not enough light. My bones feel glass-brittle, as my joints crunch out each movement stiffly, gracelessly. Somewhere, inside there are stores of lead, heavy and crumbling, weighting the whole thing down. Poisonous, most certainly. My footing is awkward. I trip over my legs. I walk into things.

Being made of the wrong things might explain my body's state. Nothing explains being made of the wrong things. Recusing myself in sleep, I dream of further transformation. Transmogrification.

Perhaps there is a way surpass the limits of biology. I imagine myself as a different thing, as stuff, inorganic and inert. Another subject in a still life, a scent of charcoal.

I didn't choose slowness. I didn't want to be this lumbering, crumbling thing. I didn't want to smell of damp mineral earth. I imagine myself as a being of light, with all of the effect and none of the affect of flesh. I'd be a thing, I'd be artifice, free of the problems of the body.

I'm always careful not to overstate pain, to not overuse the word. I know what doctors think of complaining women. I know female pain is taken less seriously, female illness treated suspiciously. I downplay, I'm a good patient, not a drug-seeker, not a complainer. I comply with my socialized silence when the stakes are high.

I know it's not in my head, rather it's in my spine, it's in my legs, in that soft fleshy bit between my thumb and index finger. I keep dropping things. I keep breaking things. I'm always breaking things. My thumb and finger each twitch and shake; I look at them as if they belong to someone else.

They probably do.

I'm no longer sure who I belong to. Not sure who pulls my invisible strings. How they tangle in my hair. How they make webs of the sterling silver I layer around my neck.

And stiffness that makes it hard to get dressed, and stiffness that makes it impossible to pick something off the floor, and stiffness that prevents me from washing my hair, from lifting my arms. All these things are pain-adjacent. The cramping spasm that my legs do when I stretch is also pain-adjacent.

Does the body in pain give off a particular scent? What about the body in pain-adjacent stiffness and spasms? I smell myself and smell powder and lime cologne. Is there a whiff of pain underneath the surface? In the sweat, or in the blood? Is there a scent of pain under the ice, beneath the soil?

How bad must pain be in order to be pain instead of pain-adjacent? The pulsing discomfort, deep in the flesh, deep in the bone, deep in the nerves: it keeps me awake and keeps me dumb. Keeps me slow and slows me slow. Slowly, slow me, so slow. The inside of my skull is hollow and heavy. The inside of my slowness is my attempting to be slow, but less. Does the stiffness or the slowness make me more golem-like?

I operate on sick time.

Sick time makes everything take longer, days are lost. I cancelled our plans, more often than not. Sick time means recovery times that are unpredictable in length but predictable in their boredom. I blow everything off, I must pick up my medication before

the drug store closes. Recently, I left a three-day gap between finishing and picking up refills of my prescriptions, this is sick time in action. The pharmacist scolded me for this gap. I looked him in the eye and told him I hadn't been able to walk.

Did I ever tell you that the cold locks the stiffness, ice solid? When I push through, I become flaking sedimentary rock. Rock much too weak to build with. Fragile and messy, I leave dust in my wake.

Sick-time is time spent waiting. I wait until the water boils and the tea steeps, I wait until the Gravol kicks in, until the Advil kicks in, until the Ambien kicks in, until the turmeric supplement kicks in. Until my new gluten-free diet kicks in. I wait until I have health benefits. I wait to see specialists. I even wait to see herbalists. I wait for something to work, and in the meantime everyone waits for me.

They are impatient.

They are disappointed.

They never quite believe me.

(But you look fine.)

The only option is to shrug, and feel guilty for my body-thing. My body-state. It only operates in sick-time these days. I have long since lost control.

I have no idea how to explain other than to turn my suffering inside out as an offering. This, I'm told, is a requirement. This, I'm told, is suspect. This is too much information. (But you look fine.) The well resent the sick. The well resent being reminded.

Pain has irrevocably changed my temporality, placing me into the sick-time continuum, fatigue more so. Years before my diagnosis, I tried to explain my constant fatigue to a doctor. She said “Welcome to life.” She said “You are getting older.” I was 31 at the time. She was straight out of med school.

My temporality is altered by nausea. I wait for it to pass before I leave home. And I’m late because it hurts to get dressed, to bend in order to tie my shoes. I’m late because I’m waiting for the room to stop spinning. I’m late because my mind stopped working. I’m late because I just needed more sleep, because, I couldn’t sleep last night. I’m late because I fell asleep on the subway coming here. What can I do but feel guilty? Sick-time is time wasted.

I bought the ‘Sorry I’m Late’ tshirt and sweatshirt specifically for our standing lunch date. She laughs each time, sitting in a booth, bent over her phone, sipping a glass of beer. My hair is a rat’s nest, tucked under my ball-cap. I couldn’t lift my arm enough to brush out the tangles. I don’t let my hair make me late.

I try to remember if I was always this mess of a woman, my past lives keep slipping further and further away.

“When did you start blacking out?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did you start experiencing vertigo?”

“I can’t remember.”

I wait for the bus to arrive, too fragile to ride my bike today. I try to keep the bits and pieces together. I knew something was really wrong that summer I fell off my bike in rush hour traffic. That was the first indication I was becoming a strange thing, as my limbs were leaden, no longer under my control and my body just crumbled beneath me. (Scent of hot asphalt.)

My body fell apart under me. My body became foreign.

I can't remember how I got to the hospital. They said my tests were all normal.

How many liberties can one take with one's reality before it transforms into fiction? Fiction shows how reality is made. Examination shows how the object is made. I touch the object even when the sign says not to. Real life makes up the flesh of fiction; fiction makes reality's bones visible. I'm playing with dates and characters to give the affect of the video, playing on a loop. You walk in at any point and watch until you don't. My skin is clammy and pale under my makeup, under my clothes. She tells me I look tired. I know this is true. I loathe hearing it.

I couldn't get a seat on the subway the other day; subsequently, muscle spasms kept me up 'til morning. I lost the next day. I often lose days and wonder if those lost days end up in the graveyard of broken, dropped things. The graveyards of my past lives. The constant pressure to catch up is also sick-time. Since becoming ill, I'm forever playing catch-up. Sick-time means being perpetually short on time. Sick-time is to be out of time. Out of time, out of synch. Few have patience for the out of time.

Last night, I sat on the stage at the performance, too awkward to decline the demand of audience participation. Now I can barely move my leg. How many days will be lost? How will I have to pay for not finding them? Somehow lost days are never where you put them.

Sick-time means less reading time or thinking time, I fall asleep too easily. Because of this, I worry that my illness makes me dumber. This worry doesn't help keep me awake during the day, but it does at night. I lose parts of myself, along with my days and my ability to move about. This is where my body-object becomes body-thing.

Doctors tell me the only thing that will help is more rest. And yet, it seems like resting is my primary activity. Sick-time makes rest a luxury. I am dull in my bedroom with my heavy eyes and my heavy limbs. I am inanimate, for now.

What is the scent of an all-encompassing boredom one is too tired to feel? Is it the scent of enclosed spaces, of dust and stillness? I cover the sad scent, subconsciously, with an approximation of joy. The diffuser spits out cool mists of ylang-ylang and lime.

Virginia could only rest because of her money: I am ashamed to feel envious. I can never get enough rest. My right leg still throbs nine days later. I've been missing out on the new shows and exhibitions, sick time lately makes the recovery too long. Instead, I fuss about my collections, arranging them as if creating still lives. I live a still life. Is it still life when life is so still?

Constantly stiff, illness has transformed me into a golem. Slow, awkward, with heavy leaden steps, my legs are as hard to lift as damp, crumbling clay. Uncured clay is heavy and yet soft. I keep pulling apart from myself. I hold the stones tight in my hand, enjoying their weight and smooth surfaces.

I told her as much as I felt comfortable saying, which wasn't much. I seek comfort as if it were my job. Even that is a job I do poorly. I feel a pressure pushing down on me while I pace the studio. Rebecca Horn made her first body extensions to describe the feeling of being tied to a bed. I'm searching for ways to describe, ways to make visible the feeling of being pulled down into the centre of the earth, as if by the strongest magnet possible. This magnet pulls me roughly with no regard for how it makes me feel. In the hospital, I felt so heavy. I needed to sit. Sometimes I'd document these visits, or my take-home heart monitors. I can't quite describe why, I suppose as proof.

(But you don't look sick.)

I marvelled at how quickly he improved, he told me he practiced at home, along with instructional videos online. I nodded, "I should do that", embarrassed to say that these beginner dance classes left me bed-ridden on the following days.

She asks: Will your next work include chronically ill bodies?

He asks: Will you perform any of these choreographies yourself?

They ask: Why don't *you* perform?

The upright have no idea what they don't know.

Daily life requires me to perform wellness, must I also perform illness? Invisible illnesses are just that. Clumsy steps, sometimes limping. Could you tell if I hadn't told you?

(But you look fine.)

I imagine they are simply unaware that for the afflicted, each action or activity requires dozens of others to be abandoned and set aside. It's the law of chronic-illness thermodynamics: each expenditure of energy must be followed up by twenty times its length and strength in recovery. I never have enough time to recover. This is sick temporality.

It's Friday night and I'm in bed, still exhausted from her reading forty-eight hours ago.

Sick-time speeds time up and sick-time slows it down. There ends up hardly being any time at all. Sick-time is perpetually being out of time, short on time.

These performers have trained bodies—not awkward thing-bodies—they are my stand-ins and collaborators. I engage them for their skill and haptic knowledge but also for their everyday physical being. They can lift their arms. They can bend. Each of them have years, decades of research in their timing, in their muscle memory. We draw on this

research when workshopping. We draw on this research when staging these performances.

I observe their first, second, and third gestures and write them down to include in the score. Each performer brings with them a catalogue of gestures, of movements to draw upon. I observe their first, second, and third gestures and create props to fit into these movements and the negative spaces their movements create.

Golems and cyborgs are different species, each a chimera. The cyborg, a hybrid of being and machine, comes into existence in stages. The golem, a hybrid of mud and magic, comes into existence suddenly. While the cyborg embodies irony and perversion, the golem embodies earnestness and folly. The golem doesn't know it's not actually alive. The golem doesn't know enough to know what it doesn't know.

My doctor says that Cymbalta was the best drug option. My doctor also says that Cymbalta is not good enough. He says to swim every day. I'm always dizzy. The cold makes my body shut down. I'm afraid of drowning. He says to get over it. He *says get over it*. He thinks I'm non-compliant. He tells me to rest more. He tells me to sleep more. I stop telling him anything. He doesn't know what he doesn't know.

In the kitchen, my legs give out under me as the room goes off kilter. It's hard to explain the vertigo to her. I can't explain it to you. I will try to explain it to you. Let me explain it to you: it's like my head is suddenly kicked, but without the impact, just the

shock and recoil. I feel as if I have been spun, quickly, intensely. My vision goes dark. If I can, I grab whatever is close by as to not fall over. I fall over nonetheless.

The first time it happened, I was in the lecture hall, on the stairs, after the break. I tumbled down and was so hurt, and confused and embarrassed. I brushed off their concern as bruises bloomed under my thick wool tights and raw silk dress.

The same bruises would make me suspect. I didn't know this at the time, but would learn that being covered in bruises means you are not a reliable witness to your own history. What do you think vertigo does? I want to ask but don't.

This week, I had the cold pitcher of lemon water in my hand when my head began to weigh one hundred pounds. I was on the floor in ice-cold water and broken glass. Later he asked if there had been an explosion, I told him it was just that I was too shaky to sweep the shards properly. I felt shaky now saying it. He gave me a strange look. He of course doesn't get it.

I can't control my body. It's a machine with perpetually low batteries. More often than not, I think of myself as inanimate. As an element in my still life. This is preferable.

I used that incident to try to explain but it didn't seem to matter; my temporality was off, is off, and for that I pay. How sick is sick enough? That's what I wanted to ask. It's what I want to scream. I said nothing and smelled the wet concrete of the kitchen floor and bright lemon rind. I smell the broken glass and the damp wool of my dress.

Should I have saved these shards and lemon slices as proof? When I said I couldn't leave my bed, this is what I meant. I meant each time I tried, a disaster lurked. Sick time must account for disaster. Sick time must account for errors, for accidents. Golem being is a disaster in and of itself.

In the night I wake up sweaty and dizzy, I vomit into the toilet. My entire body shakes.

I drink water, it smells harsh and angry.

How is it that cold water smells different from warm water? That water from the fridge smells different from water straight from the tap? That the water in the kettle smells different from both?

I am constantly thirsty. Because I'm made of crumbling soil, the water just pours right out. I start to think of my surroundings as an outgrowth of my body of work. I start to think of my surrounding as an outgrowth of my body.

The term 'body of work' always struck me as strange, more so since becoming ill. I'm now hyper-aware about how much work is required of my body to do the tasks that make up my body of work. Scrubbing the stains off of my skin, I stop and pick up the rounded object that seems to want to be held. Its form communicates its desires. I place it in the crook of my elbow and am satisfied with how it fits and with how we are both

painted the same shade of green. It's evidence of the blurry boundaries between things and myself. These are porous membranes.

So many of the women I know are ill, it seems like a conspiracy. I haven't thrown up in three weeks though, and since the art walk I feel less tired than I usually do. I get excited when symptoms ebb, maybe I'm getting better after all. I'm not.

I see another doctor, it's the refrain of the chronically ill and under-insured. He asks if my pain has increased and I tell him that in fact it's my fatigue that has. He seems at a loss. Even if my pain had increased, I would have denied it. Every doctor I have seen has treated me as a drug seeker. I've lost count of the times, I'll be given the once over and be told curtly: "I don't prescribe narcotics." I have no idea what it is in my face, in my voice, in my posture, in my red swollen hands that suggests drug-seeking. Because of this reaction, I never show up to an appointment anything less than meticulously groomed and dressed, a full face of makeup even when expending that energy means I'll be too exhausted to prepare food for the rest of the day. I must pass as something other than what I am.

I don't say any of this and instead, draw up the energy required to smile. I explain that my fatigue has led to me falling asleep in public, led to leaving me unable to think, led to be unable to care for myself. I explain sick time without the words 'sick' or 'time.' He looks up from his clipboard and tells me that the condition is about pain, that perhaps I don't have it after all. He doesn't know what he doesn't know. I smile again, replying that I'm in constant throbbing pain but it isn't half as debilitating as the fatigue or the

brain fog. Internally, I curse the person who invented the term brain fog. It sounds fucking ridiculous.

He frowns and mentions sending me for more tests, tests I know I won't be able to have done as circumstances [have](#) thrown me into a limbo of no health coverage. He tells me my blood pressure is too low, that my BMI is too high, that losing weight should give me more energy. I don't bother telling him that weight started accumulating once it became difficult to move, not vice versa; I had already decided I will not return to see this doctor. As I step off the scale, the sweat from the exertion of standing mixes with my tears. I grab the prescription for yet another medication to add to the mix, mumble a thank you and put my headphones on, trying to walk out of the clinic as fast as I can. It is not fast at all. It's pathetically, painfully slow.

Bodies that hold objects. Objects that hold bodies. I want to blur these lines to remake my body.

Working with others makes sense in so many ways. Choose a task, then enact it. That is a performance. Choose the tasks, get others to enact [them](#). That is my dance. This is my choreography. I choose the task, they dance for me. Collaboration extends my body, extends my phenomenology.

Today is dress rehearsal and I can't get out of bed. Yesterday too, I was too tired, too nauseated to make it to the theatre. First caffeine, then Gravol, but I couldn't make the room stop spinning or my eyelids less heavy. I am crumbling soil. When he gets home,

late at night, I tell him that I'm scared, that my window of productivity closes a bit each day. That I'm terrified that this is the new normal.

The golem is mute and the singer is loud. The golem washes away in the water, my edges dissolve in the ebb and flow. I used to be a singer.

We direct together: stretch your neck, stick out your jaw, look straight into the camera.

“Where my neck and my shoulders meet, that knot of bone the inside of which always feels like pins and needles!” She sings my words and they become foreign, universal. In order to try to get through this project, I'm taking more supplements than one of the upright could imagine. Sometimes they catch and dissolve in my throat, leaving me coughing bitter dust that burns my throat and mouth and lungs. They are very expensive. I have no way to know if they are helping.

She says the objects look like candy, that in her theatre training, masks must be treated as equals. I've always seen the objects as performers in their own right. The masks as other selves. She suggests the pink light; it changes everything for the better. We are on set, filming. Masks are a way forward. Masks can re-make bodies, turn them into chimeras. The chorus is enthusiastic of the weight in their hands. I think so much about how the things feel, perhaps more than how they look.

How can I use objects to make the world I want? To re-make the world, a lot?

Invent a task, do it. She said writers insert meaning, I replied that dancers do meaning.

Lately I'm reading Eileen Myles and every mention of Massachusetts makes the Modern Lovers play in my head. I mentally punctuate every thing I do with: "Radio on!" I find myself saying it aloud in public and barely care when people stare. Gonna try to do at least one thing today, with the radio on.

I bought a gorgeous milk-glass lamb on our thrifting date. Its past life was as an Avon perfume bottle, now it's a tchotchke, it was too expensive for what it is. The lingering scent is abrasive, awful, I keep soaking it in dish-soap and vinegar to remove the cloying scent. I'd planned it as a gift because it looks like her art. She creates complex and jumbled still lives that extend into space. My plan had been to fill it with vetiver or neroli. When she told me she was downsizing, no longer expressing herself through objects, I changed my mind. I didn't want the glass lamb to be downsized. I had already begun to anthropomorphise him, his absurd little face, eyes permanently closed. There was something soft and something pathetic about this glass creature whose head came off to reveal a foul-smelling empty core.

The best vetiver comes from Haiti. It smells like a cold and pristine lake that you hope will always remain your own secret swimming spot. It's simultaneously earthy and clean, mineral and vegetal. The dried grass looks like hair.

Now he lives on my shelf, becoming more at home among the paperbacks and candles, the tumbled stones and crystals, the note books, the silver plated trays of perfume and tchotchkes, the vintage jewelry boxes alternately filled with dried lavender or frankincense or Post-it notes. Like my work, like my life, my possessions are also shifting still lives. Dance with props is a tableau vivant, as are the surfaces in my apartment. As are my joints, my fascia, my skull. The internal spasms alternate between still life and dance. No matter how many times I downsize, I accumulate things, becoming too attached, imagining that they too are attached. I am obsessed with things.

I think in circles but not concentric or smooth ones, but ones that look like drunken twirls transcribed. This is a thread, this is the beginning of a new choreographic process. How does one turn such fractured thinking into a dance score? She said that Louise Bourgeois said that what makes an artist is the ability to sublimate; I've long been willing to give myself up to the conditions that present themselves. I'm learning more and more to set things up and then let them happen. To give open-ended instructions and let them play out. You find a simple task and write it down. You find a simple task and execute it. You find a simple task and repeat it. Repeat. This is a simple recipe for making the work. The scent of blood is just barely perceptible below the surface of the skin.

She told me to write on cards and shuffle them, to write this non-narrative as if playing with the I-ching. She has written some of my favourite books. I'm unfamiliar with the I-ching. I tried divining from it once, in a past life. I quickly lost patience. How can I have patience when I can't keep up? This is not to say I am afraid of chance. In fact, I embrace it.

She asks me who I would want as a coach? She tells me to look up a Moira Davey book. I told her I watched *Hemlock Forest* (2016) three times over, skipped the rest of the biennale in order to spend that time. I must be careful with my time, sick-time is always in short supply.

How does one locate the auto in autobiography? In auto-ethnography?

Do the traces of the self become effaced through the banality of illness? Does personality become erased by the overarching dullness of confinement inside a body no longer recognisable as one's own?

Sickness is the subject of this work. Sickness is the limit of this work. Sickness creates sick-time. Sick-time is slow time, results in no time. Sickness is the limit of myself.

I must learn to use chic as a barrier against humiliation. Illness is humiliating. The reactions to illness are humiliating also. I fake it and sometimes, but not always make it. In this long short time, I've learned about pettiness, become worse for wear, nevertheless, unbroken. Chic drowns out condescension. Chic serves as a functional mask; it allows me to pass for something other than what I am. She told me that one of the rules of mask work was to never remove it onstage. One of the other rules of mask work is to treat the mask as an entity. I overflow with empathy for things. But I look fine.

I swaddle myself with soft layers of silk and cashmere, and I wear dark glasses and earplugs, and a gauzy scarf around my neck that can be pulled up to cover my head. Everything is done to keep the outside world out. Everything is done to reinforce my permeable barrier.

I turned forty this week, and some of my favourite ladies came by. They brought flowers and cake, fruit and tropical plants, drawings and rare teas. We ate waffles and listened to Jessica Rylan and shared embarrassing stories. They are all artists but one academic, and one curator. The scent of soy candles burning, the scent of tea roses on the table, the scent of coconut oil on the waffle iron.

I haven't forgotten what home looks like. I haven't forgotten what support feels like. Who my colleagues are. When we talk a few days after, I'm groggy from the half tablet of Ambien I found on the floor. She tells me how wonderful the other women were, I tell her anyone less than brilliant depresses me. And they do. I tell her that the un-brilliant make me more tired than I already am.

I'm attracted to brilliance, wanting to absorb it by osmosis. Deep inside, I think that maybe the energy of my brilliant friends will allow me transform into a thing that does the task well.

Right now I'm floating on the surface of the water, buoyed by these objects that transform my surface and extend my limbs. The objects are peach and pink and shades of

green and in the moment, they make my heaviness light. I press the objects against the surface of my skin as they become waterlogged, heavy and formless.

I decide on a series of actions and repeat it. This is the choreography. This is working with what I have.

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